

Religion Fights Back

Part Three • Modernity in Karen Armstrong's *Field of Blood - Religion and the History of Violence*, 2014 edition (New York and Toronto)

During the twentieth century, there would be many attempts to resist the modern state's banishment of religion to the private sphere. To committed secularists, these religious efforts seemed like so many efforts to turn the clock back, but in fact all were modern movements that could have flourished only in our own time. Indeed, some commentators have seen them as postmodern, since they represented a widespread dissatisfaction with many of the canons of modernity. Whatever the philosophers, pundits, or politicians claimed, people all over the world expressed a wish to see religion playing a more central role in public life. This type of religiosity is often called fundamentalism—an unsatisfactory term because it does not translate easily into other languages and suggests a monolithic phenomenon. In fact, though these movements share certain family resemblances, each has its own focus and trigger. In almost every region where a secular government has been established, a religious countercultural protest has developed as well, similar to the Muslim and Hindu reform movements that had emerged in British-controlled India. The attempt to confine religion to the individual conscience had originated in the West as part of Western modernization, but to others it made no sense. Indeed, many would find the expectation unnatural, reductive, and even damaging.

As I have written elsewhere in detail, fundamentalism, be it Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, is not in itself a violent phenomenon.¹ Only a tiny proportion of fundamentalists commit acts of terror; most are simply trying to live a devout life in a world that seems increasingly hostile to faith, and nearly all begin with what is perceived as an assault on them by the secular, liberal establishment. These movements tend to follow a basic pattern: first they retreat from mainstream society to create an enclave of authentic faith, rather as the Deobandis did in the subcontinent; at a later stage, some—but by no means all—engage in a counteroffensive to “convert” the broader society. Every one of the movements I have studied is rooted in fear—in the conviction that modern society is out to destroy not only their faith but also themselves and their entire way of life. This is not simply, or even mainly, paranoid. Fundamentalism first became a force in Jewish life, for example, after the Holocaust, Hitler's attempt to exterminate European Jewry. Moreover, we have seen that in the past when people fear annihilation, their horizons tend to shrink, and they can lash out violently—though most “fundamentalists” have confined their antagonism to rhetoric or nonviolent political activity. It will be our concern to consider the reasons why those exceptional cases turn out as they do.

We can learn a great deal about fundamentalism generally from a crisis in one of the first of these movements, which developed in the United States during and immediately after the First World War. The term itself was coined in the 1920s by American Protestants who resolved to return to the “fundamentals” of Christianity. Their retreat from public life after the Civil War had narrowed and, perhaps, distorted their vision. Instead of engaging as before with such issues as racial or economic inequality, they focused on biblical literalism, convinced that every single assertion of scripture was literally true. And so their enemy was no longer social injustice but the German Higher Criticism of the Bible, which had

been embraced by the more liberal American Christians who were still attempting to bring the gospel to bear on social problems. For all the claims that fundamentalisms make of a return to basics, however, these movements are highly innovative. Before the sixteenth century, for instance, Christians had always been encouraged to read scripture allegorically; even Calvin did not believe that the first chapter of Genesis was a factual account of the origins of life, and he took severely to task those “frantic persons” who believed that it was.² The new fundamentalist outlook now required a wholesale denial of glaring discrepancies in scripture itself. Closed to any alternative and coherent only in its own terms, biblical inerrancy created a shuttered mind-set born of great fear. “Religion has to fight for its life against a large class of scientific men,” warned Charles Hodge, who formulated this dogma in 1874.³ This embattled preoccupation with the status of the biblical text reflected a wider Christian concern about the nature of religious authority. Just four years earlier the First Vatican Council (1870) had promulgated the new—and highly controversial—doctrine of papal infallibility. At a time when modernity was demolishing old truths and leaving crucial questions unanswered, there was a yearning for absolute certainty.

Fundamentalisms are also often preoccupied by the horror of modern warfare and violence. The shocking slaughter in Europe during the First World War could only be the beginning of the end, the evangelicals concluded; these times of unprecedented carnage must be the battles foretold in the book of Revelation. There was a deep anxiety about the centralization of modern society and anything approaching world rule. In the new League of Nations, they saw the revival of the Roman Empire predicted in Revelation, the abode of Antichrist.⁴ Fundamentalists now saw themselves grappling with satanic forces that would shortly destroy the world. Their spirituality was defensive and filled with a paranoid terror of the sinister influence of the Catholic minority; they even described American democracy as the “most devilish rule this world has ever seen.”⁵ The American fundamentalists’ chilling scenario of the end time, with its wars, bloodshed, and slaughter, is symptomatic of a deep-rooted distress that cannot be assuaged by cool rational analysis. In less stable countries, it would be all too easy for a similar malaise, despair, and fear to erupt in physical violence.

Their horrified recoil from the violence of the First World War also led American fundamentalists to veto modern science. They became obsessed with evolutionary theory. There was a widespread belief that German wartime atrocities were the result of the nation’s devotion to Darwinian social theory, according to which existence was a brutal, godless struggle in which only the strongest should survive. This was, of course, a vulgar distortion of Darwin’s hypothesis, but at a time when people were trying to make sense of the bloodiest war in human history, evolution seemed to symbolize everything that was most ruthless in modern life. These ideas were particularly disturbing to small-town Americans who felt that their culture was being taken over by the secularist elite—almost as though they were being colonized by a foreign power. This distress came to a head in the famous Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, when the fundamentalists, represented by the Democratic politician William Jennings Bryan, tried to defend the state legislature’s prohibition of the teaching of evolution in the public schools. They were opposed by the rationalist campaigner Clarence Darrow, supported by the newly founded American Civil Liberties Union.⁶ Even though the state law was upheld, Bryan’s bumbling performance under Darrow’s sharp interrogation thoroughly discredited the fundamentalists’ cause. Their response to this humiliation is instructive. The press mounted a virulent campaign exposing Bryan and his fundamentalist supporters as hopeless anachronisms.

Fundamentalists had no place in modern society, argued the journalist H. L. Mencken: “They are everywhere where learning is too heavy a burden for human minds to carry, even the vague, pathetic learning on tap in the little red schoolhouses.” He mocked Dayton as a “one-horse Tennessee village” and its citizens the “gaping primates of the upland valleys.”⁷ Yet whenever a fundamentalist movement is attacked, either with violence or in a media campaign, it almost invariably becomes more extreme. It shows malcontents that their fear is well grounded: the secular world really is out to destroy them. Before the Scopes Trial, not even Hodge had believed that Genesis was scientifically sound in every detail, but afterward “creation science” became the rallying cry of the fundamentalist movement. Before Dayton, some leading fundamentalists still engaged in social work with people on the left; afterward, they swung to the far right, retreating altogether from the mainstream and creating their own churches, colleges, broadcasting stations, and publishing houses. They grew and grew below the mainstream cultural radar. Once they became aware of their considerable public support, in the late 1970s they would reemerge from the margins with Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority.

American fundamentalism would ever after vie to be heard as a decisive voice in American politics—with notable success. It would not resort to violence, largely because American Protestants did not suffer as greatly as did, for example, the Muslims of the Middle East. Unlike the secular rulers of Egypt or Iran, the U.S. government did not confiscate their property, torture and assassinate their clergy, or cruelly dismantle their institutions. In America secular modernity was a homegrown product, which was not imposed militarily from outside but had evolved organically over time, and when they arrived on the public scene in the late 1970s, American fundamentalists could use well-established democratic channels to make their point. Although American Protestant fundamentalism was not usually an agent of violence, it was, to a degree, a response to violence: the trauma of modern warfare and the psychological assault of the aggressive disdain of the secularist establishment. Both can distort a religious tradition in ways that reverberate far beyond the community of the faithful. Nevertheless, fundamentalism in America shares with other disaffected groups the sensibility of the colonized, in its defiant self-assertion and in a determination to recover one’s own identity and culture against a powerful Other.

Muslim fundamentalism, by contrast, has often—though again, not always—segued into physical aggression. This is not because Islam is constitutionally more prone to violence than Protestant Christianity but rather because Muslims had a much harsher introduction to modernity. Before the birth of the modern state in the crucible of colonialism, Islam had continued in many Muslim lands to operate as the organizing principle of society. In 1920, after the First World War and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France divided Ottoman territories into Western-style nation-states and established mandates and protectorates there before granting these new countries independence. But the inherent contradictions of the nation-state would be especially wrenching in the Muslim world, where there was no tradition of nationalism. The frontiers drawn up by the Europeans were so arbitrary that it was extremely difficult to create a national “imaginary community.” In Iraq, for example, where Sunnis were a minority, the British appointed a Sunni ruler to govern both the Shii majority and the Kurds in the north. In Lebanon, 50 percent of the population was Muslim and naturally wanted close economic and political relations with their Arab neighbors, but the Christian government selected by the French preferred stronger ties with Europe. The partition of Palestine and the creation of the Jewish State of Israel by the United Nations in 1948 proved no less mischievous. It resulted in the forcible displacement of 750,000 Arab Palestinians, and those who remained found themselves living in a state that was hostile to their nation. There was the added complication that Israel was a secular state founded for adherents of one of the world’s ancient religions. Yet

for the first twenty years of its existence, the Israeli leadership was aggressively secular, and the violence inflicted on the Palestinians, Israel's wars with its neighbors, and the Palestinian riposte were fought not for religion but for secular nationalism.

The British partition of the subcontinent into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947 was similarly problematic, since both were established as secular states in the name of religion. The brutal process of partition caused the displacement of over seven million people and the deaths of a million others who were attempting to flee from one state to join their coreligionists in the other. In both India and Pakistan, vast numbers found themselves unable to speak the so-called national language. A particularly volatile situation was created in Kashmir, which despite a Muslim majority was given to India, because it was ruled by a Hindu maharaja. That British decision is still contested, and a similar arbitrariness was felt in the separation of eastern and western Pakistan by a thousand miles of Indian territory.

As they struggled for independence before partition, Hindus had engaged in an intense discussion about the legitimacy of fighting the British, shaped in large part by the Bhagavad-Gita, a text that has deeply shaped the collective memory of India. Ahimsa was an important spiritual value in India, yet the Gita seemed to sanction violence. Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), however, disagreed with this interpretation. He had been born into a vaishya family and had many Jain friends who influenced his later attitudes. In 1914, after working for years as a lawyer in South Africa to oppose discriminatory legislation against Indians, he had returned to India and become interested in the issue of home rule, founding the Natal Indian Congress Party and developing his unique method of resisting colonial oppression by nonresistance. Besides the Hindu religious tradition, he had been influenced by Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*.

Central to Gandhi's worldview was the insight, first developed in the Upanishads, that all beings were manifestations of the Brahman. Since everybody shared the same sacred core, violence went against the metaphysical bias of the entire universe. This deeply spiritual vision of the oneness of existence directly countered the aggressive separatism and chauvinism of the nation-state. Gandhi's peaceable refusal to obey the self-serving obduracy of the British regime was based on three principles: ahimsa, satyagraha (the "soul force" that comes with the realization of the profound unity of humanity), and swaraj ("self-rule"). In the Gita, Gandhi maintained, Arjuna's initial refusal to fight had not been true ahimsa, because he still regarded himself as different from his enemies and had not realized that they were all, friend and foe alike, embodiments of the Brahman. Had Arjuna truly understood that he and Duryodana, the adversary he was about to fight, were ultimately one, he would have acquired the "soul force" that had the power to transform an enemy's hatred into love.

But as we have seen, the same texts and spiritual practices can lead to entirely different courses of actions. Others opposed this interpretation of the Gita. The Hindu scholar Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950) argued that Krishna's validation of violence in the Gita was simply an acknowledgment of life's grim reality. Yes, it would be nice to remain peacefully above the fray, but until Gandhi's "soul force" actually became an effective reality in the world, the natural aggression inherent in both men and nations "tramples down, breaks, slaughters, burns, pollutes as we see it doing today." Gandhi might discover that he had caused as much destruction of life by abjuring violence as those who had resorted to fighting.⁸ Aurobindo was voicing the view of Gandhi's critics, who thought that he closed his eyes to the fact that the British response to his nonviolent campaigns actually resulted

in hideous bloodshed. But Aurobindo was also articulating the eternal dilemma of Ashoka: Is nonviolence feasible in the inescapably violent world of politics?

Nevertheless, Gandhi saw his theory through to its ultimate conclusion. Nonviolence meant not only loving your enemies, he maintained, but realizing that they were not your enemies at all. He might hate the systemic and military ruthlessness of colonial rule, but he could not allow himself to hate the people who implemented it:

Mine is not an exclusive love. I cannot love Moslems or Hindus and hate Englishmen. For if I love merely Hindus and Moslems because their ways are on the whole pleasing to me, I shall soon begin to hate them when their ways displease me, which they may well do any moment. A love that is based on the goodness of those whom you love is a mercenary affair.⁹

Without reverence for the sanctity of every single human being and the “equanimity” long seen in India as the pinnacle of the spiritual quest, “politics bereft of religion,” Gandhi believed, were a “death-trap because they kill the soul.”¹⁰ Secular nationalism seems unable to cultivate a similarly universal ideology, even though our globalized world is so deeply interconnected. Gandhi could not countenance Western secularism: “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest creature as oneself,” he concluded in his autobiography. Devotion to this truth required one to be involved in every field of life; it had brought him into politics, for “those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”¹¹ Gandhi’s last years were darkened by the communal violence that had erupted during and after partition. He was assassinated in 1948 by a radical nationalist who believed that Gandhi had given too many concessions to the Muslims and had made a large monetary donation to Pakistan.

As they forged their national identities in the peculiarly tense conditions of India, Muslims and Hindus would both fall prey to the besetting sin of secular nationalism: its inability to tolerate minorities. And because their outlook was still permeated by spirituality, this nationalist bias distorted their traditional religious vision. As violence between Muslims and Hindus escalated during the 1920s, the Arya Samaj became more militant.¹² At a conference in 1927, it formed a military cadre, the Arya Vir Dal (“Troop of Aryan Horses”). It declared that the new Aryan hero must develop the virtues of the Kshatriya—courage, physical strength, and, especially, proficiency in the use of weapons. His principal duty was to defend the rights of the Aryan nation against the Muslims and the British.¹³ The Arya was anxious not to be outdone by the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (“National Volunteer Association”), usually referred to as RSS, founded in central India three years earlier by Keshav B. Hedgewar. Where the Arya had adapted the British idea of “religion” to “Hinduism,” RSS had fused traditional religious ideals with Western nationalism. It was primarily a character-building organization designed to develop an ethos of service, based on loyalty, discipline, and a respect for the Hindu heritage, and it appealed particularly to the urban middle classes. Its hero was the seventeenth-century warrior Shivaji who, empowered by his fidelity to traditional Hindu ritual as well as his organizational skills, had led a successful revolt against the Moghuls. He had managed to weld recruits from disparate peasant castes into a unified army, and RSS vowed to do the same in British India.¹⁴

Thus a new religiosity was coming to birth in India, one that cultivated Hindu strength not by evoking ahimsa but by developing the traditional warrior ethos. Yet this combination of the Kshatriya ideal with secular nationalism was dangerous. For RSS, Mother India was

not simply a territorial entity but a living goddess. She had always been revered as a holy land, and her seas, rivers, and mountains were sacred, but for centuries she had been desecrated by foreigners and would shortly be raped by partition. Traditionally, the Mother Goddess had embraced everyone, but with its new nationalist intolerance of minorities, RSS insisted that she could no longer admit Muslims or East Asian Buddhists.

Hedgewar was an activist rather than an intellectual, his thinking deeply influenced by V. D. Savarkar, a brilliant radical imprisoned by the British whose classic *Hindutva* ("Hinduness") had been smuggled out of prison and published in 1923. It defined the Hindu as a person who acknowledged the integrity of Greater India (which stretched from the Himalayas to Iran and Singapore) and revered her not only as Motherland, as other nationalists did, but also as Holy Land.¹⁵ This fusion of religion and secular nationalism was potentially toxic. In Savarkar's books, the emerging Hindu national identity depended upon the exclusion of Islam: the whole complex history of India was presented as a struggle to the death with Muslim imperialism. Even though Hindus had always been the majority population, they had been conditioned by centuries of imperial domination to see themselves as an embattled, endangered minority.¹⁶ Like so many subject peoples, they had developed a history of injury and humiliation, which can corrode a religious tradition and incline it toward violence. Some experienced their long oppression as a national disgrace. During the 1930s M. S. Golwalkar, the second leader of the RSS, felt an affinity with the ideals of National Socialism, in part the product of Germany's humiliation by the Allies after the First World War. Foreigners in India had only two options, Golwalkar argued: "The foreign races must lose their separate existence ... or [they] may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights." Golwalkar praised the Germans for "purging the country of the Semitic Races"; India, he believed, had much to learn from this Aryan "Race pride."¹⁷

The horror of partition could only inflame the history of grievance that was so dangerously poisoning relations between Muslims and Hindus. As the psychologist Sudhir Kakar has explained, for decades hundreds of thousands of Hindu and Muslim children have listened to tales of the violence of that time, which "dwell on the fierceness of the implacable enemy. This is a primary channel through which historical enmity is transmitted from one generation or the next." It also created a rift between secularist and religious Hindus.¹⁸ Secularists convinced themselves that this violence could never happen again. Many blamed the British for the tragedy; others regarded it merely as a terrifying aberration. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, believed that the industrialization of the country and the spread of scientific rationalism and democracy would counter these communal passions.

But there was a disturbing portent of future trouble. In 1949 an image of Ram, incarnation of Vishnu and chief exemplar of Hindu virtue, was discovered in a building at the site of his mythological birthplace in Ayodhya on the eastern Gangetic plain. This was also the site of a mosque said to have been established by Babur, the first Moghul emperor, in 1528.¹⁹ Devout Hindus claimed that Ram's image had been placed there by God; Muslims, naturally, denied this. There were violent clashes, and the district magistrate, a member of RSS, refused to remove the image. Because their images require regular worship, Hindus were henceforth permitted to enter the building for devotional chanting on the anniversary of the miraculous arrival of Ram's statue. Forty years later this sacred geography would trump the scientific rationalism so confidently predicted by the secularists.

The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), was an unabashed secularist who simply wanted to create a state in which Muslims would not be defined or limited by their religious affiliation. In fact, the nation was defined by Islam before it had even begun. This inevitably raised certain expectations, and from the beginning, while the government was still resolutely secularist, there was pressure to resacralize political life. The Deobandis became particularly powerful in Pakistan. They endorsed the modern system of territorial nationalism and secular democracy and offered free education to the poor in their madrassas at a time when the state school system was collapsing due to lack of funding. Their students would be isolated from mainstream secular life and schooled in the Deobandis' peculiarly rigid and intolerant form of Islam. To protect their Islamic lifestyle, the Deobandis also founded a political party, the JUI (Association of Ulema of Islam). By the late 1960s, having accumulated tens of thousands of students and alumni, they were in an excellent position to pressure the government to Islamize civil law and the banking system, thereby creating jobs for their ultrareligious graduates.

Quite different was the Jamaat-i-Islami, which had been founded in India in 1941 to oppose the creation of a separate secular state. Jamaat had no madrassa base and did not cling to the past, as the Deobandis did, but developed an Islamic ideology influenced by the modern ideals of liberty and independence. Abul Ala Maududi (1903–79), its founder, argued that because God alone ruled human affairs, nothing else—"be it a human being, a family, a class, or a group of people, or even the human race as a whole"—could claim sovereignty.²⁰ Therefore nobody was obliged to obey any mortal authority. Each generation had to fight the jahiliyyah of its day, as the Prophet had done, since jahili violence, greed, and Godlessness were an ever-present danger. Western secularism epitomized the modern jahiliyyah because it amounted to a rebellion against God's rule.²¹ Islam, Maududi insisted, was not a Western-style "religion," separate from politics; here he was in full agreement with Gandhi. Rather, Islam was a *din*, a whole way of life that had to include economic, social, and political as well as ritualized activities:²²

The use of the word [*din*] categorically refutes the views of those who believe a prophet's message is principally aimed at ensuring worship of the one God, adherence to a set of beliefs, and observance of a few rituals. This also refutes the views of those who think that *din* has nothing to do with cultural, political, economic, legal, judicial, and other matters pertaining to this world.²³

Muslims had been charged to reject the structural violence of the jahili state and to implement economic justice, social harmony, and political equality in public as well as private life, all based on a profound awareness of God (*taqwah*).

Before partition, Jamaat had concentrated on training its members to reform their own lives in the Greater Jihad; only by living an authentically Quranic life could they hope to inspire the people with a longing for Islamic government. But after partition, the movement split. Of its 625 members, 240 remained in India. Since only 11 percent of the population of India was Muslim, Indian Jamaat could not hope to create an Islamic state; instead, its members acquired a qualified appreciation of the moderate (as opposed to atheistic) secularism of the new state of India that forbade discrimination on the basis of religious belief. This, they declared, was a "blessing" and a "guarantee for a safe future for Islam in India."²⁴ But in Pakistan, where there was a possibility of an Islamic state, Maududi and his 385 Jamaat disciples felt no such constraints. They became the most organized Pakistani political party, gained the support of the educated urban classes, and campaigned vigorously against the dictatorship of Ayub Khan (r. 1958–69), who confiscated all clerical property, and the socialist regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (r. 1970–77),

who used Islamic symbols and slogans to win popular support but in reality had nothing but contempt for religion.

Maududi, therefore, was still committed to the struggle (jihad) against jahili secularism, but he always interpreted jihad broadly in the traditional manner so that it did not simply mean “holy war”; one could “strive” to achieve God’s sovereignty by peaceful political activities, such as writing books or working in education.²⁵ It is a mistake, therefore, to brand Pakistani Jamaat as fanatically intent on violence; the fact that the party went in two such different directions after partition shows that it had the flexibility to adapt to circumstances. Maududi would have nothing to do with revolutionary coups, assassinations, or policies that stirred up hatred and conflict, insisting that an Islamic state could put down firm roots only if ends and means were “clean and commendable.”²⁶ The transition from a secular nation-state to a truly Islamic society must, he would always maintain, be “natural, evolutionary and peaceful.”²⁷

But in Pakistan physical force had become one of the chief ways of doing politics.²⁸ Leaders regularly came to power in military coups, and in their ruthless suppression of political opposition, neither Khan nor Bhutto could be seen as examples of benign, peaceable secularism. So prevalent was armed conflict in Pakistani society that a group that abjured it had little hope of success. In an effort to gain popular support for Jamaat, Maududi agreed to lead a campaign against the so-called heretical Ahmadi sect in 1953 and wrote an inflammatory pamphlet, which sparked riots and put him in prison.²⁹ This, however, was an aberration. Maududi continued to denounce the violence of Pakistani politics and condemned the aggressive activities of Jamaat’s affiliate IJT (Islami Jamiat-i-Taliban), the Society of Islamic Students, which organized strikes and demonstrations against Bhutto, paralyzed the communication systems, disrupted urban commerce and educational establishments, and led militant confrontations with the police. While other members of Jamaat succumbed to Pakistan’s endemic violence, Maududi remained committed to achieving an Islamic state democratically. He repeatedly insisted that an Islamic state could not be a theocracy, because no group or individual had the right to rule in God’s name. An Islamic government must be elected by the people for a fixed term; there must be universal adult franchise, regular elections, a multiparty system, an independent judiciary, and guaranteed human rights and civil liberties—a system not very different from the parliamentary democracy of Westminster.³⁰

When Zia al-Haqq seized power in a coup in 1977, established a dictatorship, and announced that Pakistan would follow Shariah law, he drew heavily on Maududi’s writings in his speeches. He also brought several senior Jamaat officials into his cabinet and employed thousands of Jamaat activists in the civil service, education, and the army. Shariah courts were established, and traditional Islamic penalties for alcohol, theft, prostitution, and adultery were introduced. By this time, Maududi was in failing health, and the current Jamaat leaders supported Zia’s military regime, regarding it as a promising beginning. But Maududi had profound misgivings. How could a dictatorship, which usurped God’s sovereignty and ruled with martial and structural violence, be truly Islamic? Shortly before his death, he penned a brief note to this effect:

The implementation of Islamic laws alone cannot yield the positive result Islam really aims at. ... For, merely by dint of this announcement [of Islamic laws] you cannot kindle the hearts of the people with the light of faith, enlighten their minds with the teachings of Islam, and mold their habits and manners corresponding to the virtues of Islam.³¹

Future generations of Muslim activists would have done well to heed this lesson.

Western modernity had conferred two blessings in the places it was first conceived: political independence and technical innovation. But in the Middle East, modernity arrived as colonial subjugation, and there was little potential for innovation, with the West so far ahead that Muslims could only imitate.³² The unwelcome changes, imposed as foreign imports from without, were uncongenially abrupt. A process that had taken centuries in Europe had to be effected in a matter of decades, superficially and often violently. The almost insuperable problems faced by modernizers had already become clear in the career of Muhammad Ali (1769–1849). He had become governor of Egypt after Napoleon's invasion and managed the monumental feat of dragging this backward Ottoman province into the modern world within a mere forty years. Yet he could do so only by ruthless coercion. Twenty-three thousand peasants died in the forced labor bands that improved Egypt's irrigation and communications. Thousands more were conscripted into the army; some cut off their fingers and even blinded themselves to avoid military service. There could never be technological self-sufficiency, because Muhammad Ali had to buy all his machinery, weapons, and manufactured goods from Europe.³³ And there could be no independence: despite his achieving a degree of autonomy from the Ottomans, modernization eventually led to Egypt's becoming a virtual British colony. Ismail Pasha (1830–95), Muhammad Ali's grandson, made the country too desirable to the Europeans: he had commissioned French engineers to construct the Suez Canal, built nine hundred miles of railways, irrigated over a million acres of hitherto uncultivable land, set up modern schools for both boys and girls, and transformed Cairo into an elegant modern city. In the process, he bankrupted the country, ultimately giving the British the pretext they needed in 1882 to establish a military occupation to protect the interests of shareholders.

Even when a degree of modernization was achieved, the European colonial powers managed to snuff it out. Perhaps Muhammad Ali's greatest achievement had been the creation of the cotton industry, which promised to give Egypt a reliable economic base until Lord Cromer, the first consul-general of Egypt, put a brake on production, since Egyptian cotton damaged British interests. No friend to the emancipation of women—he was a founding member of the Anti-Women's Suffrage League in London—Cromer also scaled back Ismail's programs to educate women and blocked them from entering the professions. Every benefaction was less than it seemed. In 1922 the British allowed Egypt a modicum of independence, with a new king, a parliamentary body, and a liberal Western-style constitution, but they retained control of military and foreign policy. Between 1923 and 1930 there were three general elections, each won by the Wafd party, which campaigned for a reduced British presence in Egypt; but each time the British forced the elected government to resign.³⁴ In the same way, Europeans obstructed the development of democracy in Iran, where modernizing clergy and intellectuals had led a successful revolution against the Qajar shah in 1906, demanding constitutional rule and representative government. But almost immediately the Russians helped the shah to close the new parliament (majlis), and during the 1920s, the British routinely rigged elections to prevent the majlis from nationalizing the Iranian oil that fueled their navy.³⁵

The Muslims of the Middle East had therefore experienced the secular rule of the colonial powers as militarily and systemically violent. Things did not improve after they achieved independence in the twentieth century. As the Europeans dismantled their empires and left the region, they ceded power to the precolonial ruling classes, which were so embedded in the old aristocratic ethos that they were incapable of modernization. They were usually deposed in coups organized by reform-minded army officers, who were virtually the only commoners to receive a Western-style education: Reza Khan in Iran (1921), Colonel Adib

Shissak in Syria (1949), and Gemal Abd al-Nasser in Egypt (1952). Like Muhammad Ali, these reformers modernized rapidly, superficially, and even more violently than the Europeans. Used to barracks life and the following of orders without question, they cut down opposition ruthlessly and underestimated the complexities of modernization.³⁶ Secularism did not come to their subjects as liberating and irenic. Instead, these secularizing rulers effectually terrorized their subjects by tearing down familiar institutions, so that their world became unrecognizable.

Again, you could take religion out of the state but not out of the nation. The army officers wanted to secularize but found themselves ruling devout nations for whom a secularized Islam was a contradiction in terms.³⁷ Undeterred, these rulers declared war on the religious establishment. Following the aggressive methods of the French revolutionaries, Muhammad Ali had starved the clergy financially, taking away their tax exemption, confiscating the religiously endowed properties (awqaf) that were their principal source of income, and systematically robbing them of any shred of power.³⁸ For the Egyptian ulema, modernity was forever tainted by this ruthless assault, and they became cowed and reactionary. Nasser changed tack and turned them into state officials. For centuries the ulema's learned expertise had guided the people through the intricacies of Islamic law, but they had also stood as a protective bulwark between the people and the systemic violence of the state. Now the people came to despise them as government lackeys. This deprived them of responsible and expert religious authority that was aware of the complexity of the Islamic tradition. Self-appointed religious leaders and more simple-minded radicals would step into the breach, often to disastrous effect.³⁹

Throughout the Muslim world, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), founder of the modern republic of Turkey, seemed to personify the violence of secularism. After the First World War, he had managed to keep the British and French out of Anatolia, the Ottoman heartland, so Turkey had the great advantage of avoiding colonization. Determined to deprive Islam of all legal, political, and economic influence, Atatürk is often admired in the West as an enlightened Muslim leader.⁴⁰ In fact, he was a dictator who hated Islam, which he described as a "putrefied corpse."⁴¹ He proceeded in the usual belligerent manner to outlaw the Sufi orders, seize their properties, shut down the madrassas, and appropriate the awqaf. Most important, he abolished Shariah law, replacing it with a legal code essentially adopted from Switzerland that was meaningless to most of the population.⁴² Finally, in 1925, Atatürk declared the caliphate null and void. It had long been a dead letter politically but had symbolized the unity of the ummah and its link with the Prophet; at this bleak moment in their history, Sunni Muslims everywhere experienced its loss as a spiritual and cultural trauma. Western approval of Atatürk led many to believe that the West sought to destroy Islam itself.

In order to control the rising merchant class, the last Ottoman sultans had systematically deported or killed their Greek and Armenian subjects, who constituted about 90 percent of the bourgeoisie. In 1908 the Young Turks, a party of modernizers, deposed Sultan Abdul-Hamid II in a coup. They had absorbed the antireligious positivism of such Western thinkers as Auguste Comte (1798–1857) as well as the new "scientific" racism, an outgrowth of the Age of Reason that came into good use in the Age of Empire. During the First World War, in order to create a purely Turkic state, the Young Turks ordered the deportation and "resettlement" of Armenian Christians from the empire on the pretext that they were conniving with the enemy. This led to the first genocide of the twentieth century, committed not by religious fanatics but by avowed secularists. Over a million Armenians were slaughtered: men and youths were killed where they stood, while women, children, and the elderly were driven into the desert where they were raped, shot, starved,

poisoned, suffocated, or burned to death.⁴³ “I came into this world a Turk,” declared the physician Mehmet Resid, the “Executioner Governor.” “Armenian traitors had found a niche for themselves in the bosom of the fatherland; they were dangerous microbes. Isn’t it a duty of a doctor to destroy these microbes?”⁴⁴

When Atatürk came to power, he completed this racial purge. For centuries Greeks and Turks had dwelled together on both sides of the Aegean. Atatürk now partitioned the region and organized a massive exchange of populations. Greek-speaking Christians living in what is now Turkey were deported to what would become Greece, while Turkish-speaking Muslims living in Greece were sent the other way. For many in the Muslim world, therefore, Western secularism and nationalism would be forever associated with ethnic cleansing, virulent religious intolerance, and a violent destruction of precious Islamic institutions.

In Iran, Reza Khan courted the Westernized upper and middle classes but took no interest in the peasant masses, who therefore relied more than ever on the ulema. Two nations were developing in the country, one modernized, the other excluded from the benefits of modernity and cruelly deprived of the religious traditions that gave their life meaning. Determined to base the state’s identity on ancient Persian culture rather than on Islam, Reza summarily outlawed the ashura mourning rituals for Husain, forbade Iranians to make the hajj, and drastically curtailed the scope of the Shariah courts. When Ayatollah Modarris objected, he was imprisoned and executed.⁴⁵ In 1928 Reza issued the Laws on the Uniformity of Dress, and with their bayonets his soldiers tore off the women’s veils and ripped them to pieces in the street.⁴⁶ On Ashura 1929, the police surrounded the prestigious Fayziyah Madrasa in Qum, and when the students spilled out after their classes, they were stripped of their traditional clothes and forced into Western garb. In 1935 the police were ordered to open fire on a crowd who had staged a peaceful demonstration against the dress laws in the holy shrine of the Eighth Imam in Mashhad and killed hundreds of unarmed Iranians.⁴⁷ In the West, the secular nation-state had been set up to curb the violence of religion; for many thousands of people in the Middle East, secular nationalism seemed a bloodthirsty, destructive force that deprived them of the spiritual support that had been their mainstay.

The Middle East had thus been brutally initiated into the new system of oppression and violence that had come into being during the colonial period. These former provinces of the mighty Ottoman Empire had been aggressively reduced by the colonialists almost overnight to a dependent bloc, their laws replaced by foreign codes, their age-old rituals abolished, and their clergy executed, impoverished, and publicly humiliated. Surrounded by modern buildings, institutions, and Western-style street layouts, people no longer felt at home in their own countries. The effect of their transformation has been compared to watching a beloved friend become slowly disfigured before one’s eyes by mortal sickness. Egypt, always a leader in the Arab world, had had a particularly difficult transition to modernity, with a much longer period of direct Western rule than many other Middle Eastern countries. This persistent foreign presence and the lack of spiritual and moral leadership had created a dangerous malaise in the country and a corrosive sense of humiliation, which neither the British nor the new Egyptian government seemed willing to address. Some reformers belonging to the traditional Egyptian elite tried to counter this growing alienation. Muhammad Abdu (1849–1905), sheikh of Al-Azhar, suggested that modern legal and constitutional arrangements should be linked to traditional Islamic norms that would make them comprehensible. As it was, the people were so bewildered by the secular legal system that Egypt was effectively becoming a country without law.⁴⁸ Lord Cromer, however, who regarded the social system of Islam as “politically and socially moribund,” would have none of it.⁴⁹ In the same vein, Rashid Rida (1865– 1935), Abdu’s

biographer, wanted to establish a college where students would be introduced to modern jurisprudence, sociology, and science at the same time as they studied Islamic law, so that it might be possible one day to modernize the Shariah without diluting it and to formulate laws based on authentic Muslim tradition instead of a foreign ideology.⁵⁰

But these reformers failed to inspire disciples who could carry their ideas forward. Far more successful was Hassan al-Banna (1906–49), founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and one of the more positive “free lances” who would step into the spiritual leadership vacuum created by the modernizers.⁵¹ A schoolteacher who had studied modern science, Banna knew that modernization was essential but believed that because Egyptians were deeply religious, it could succeed only if accompanied by a spiritual reformation. Their own cultural traditions would serve them better than alien ideologies that they could never make fully their own. Banna and his friends had been shocked and saddened by the political and social confusion in Egypt and by the stark contrast between the luxurious homes of the British and the hovels of the Egyptian workers in the Canal Zone. One night in March 1928, six of his students begged Banna to take action, eloquently articulating the inchoate distress experienced by so many:

We know not the practical way to reach the glory of Islam and to serve the welfare of the Muslims. We are weary of this life of humiliation and restriction. So we see that the Arabs and the Muslims have no status and no dignity. They are no more than mere hirelings belonging to foreigners.... We are unable to perceive the road to action as you perceive it, or to know the path to the service of the fatherland, the religion and the ummah.⁵²

That very night Banna created the Society of Muslim Brothers, which inaugurated a grassroots reformation of Egyptian society.

The Society clearly answered an urgent need because it would become one of the most powerful players in Egyptian politics. By the time of Banna’s assassination in 1949, it had two thousand branches throughout Egypt, and the Brotherhood was the only Egyptian organization that represented every social group—civil servants, students, urban workers, and peasants.⁵³ The Society was not a militant organization but sought simply to bring modern institutions to the Egyptian public in a familiar Islamic setting. The Brothers built schools for girls and boys beside the mosque and founded the Rovers, a scout movement that became the most popular youth group in the country; they set up night schools for workers and tutorial colleges to prepare students for the civil service examinations; they built clinics and hospitals in the rural areas; and they involved the Rovers in improving sanitation and health education in the poorer districts. The Society also set up trade unions that acquainted workers with their rights; in the factories where the Brotherhood was a presence, they earned a just wage, had health insurance and paid holidays, and could pray in the company’s mosque. Banna’s counterculture thus proved that, far from being some obsolete vestige of another era, Islam could become an effective modernizing force as well as promote spiritual vitality. But the Brotherhood’s success would prove double-edged, for it called attention to the government’s neglect of education and labor conditions. Banna’s Society of Muslim Brothers thus came to be perceived not as a help but as a grave threat to the regime.

The Society was not perfect: it tended to be anti-intellectual, its pronouncements often defensive and self-righteous, its view of the West distorted by the colonial experience, and its leaders intolerant of dissent. Most seriously, it had developed a terrorist wing. After the creation of the State of Israel, the plight of the Palestinian refugees became a disturbing

symbol of Muslims' impotence in the modern world. For some, violence seemed the only way forward. Anwar Sadat, future president of Egypt, founded a "murder society" to attack the British in the Canal Zone.⁵⁴ Other paramilitary groups were attached to the palace and the Wafd, and so it was perhaps inevitable that some Brothers should form the "Secret Apparatus" (al-jihaz al-sirri). Numbering only about a thousand, the Apparatus was so clandestine that even most of the Brothers had never heard of it. Banna denounced the Apparatus but could not control it and eventually it would both taint and endanger the Society.⁵⁵ When the Apparatus assassinated Prime Minister Muhammad al-Nuqrashi on December 28, 1948, the Society condemned the atrocity in the strongest terms. But the government seized this opportunity to suppress it. On February 12, 1949, almost certainly at the behest of the new prime minister, Banna was gunned down in the street.

When Nasser seized power in 1952, the Society had regrouped but was deeply divided. In the early days while he was still unpopular, Nasser courted the Brotherhood, even though he was a committed secularist and an ally of the Soviet Union. When it became clear that he had no intention of creating an Islamic state, however, a member of the Apparatus shot him during a rally. Nasser survived, and his courage under attack did wonders for his popularity. He now felt able to move against the Society, and by the end of 1954 more than a thousand Brothers had been brought to trial, and uncounted others, many of whom had committed no greater offense than distributing leaflets, never had even a day in court but languished in prison uncharged for fifteen years. After Nasser became a hero in the larger Arab world by defying the West during the Suez Crisis of 1956, he intensified his efforts to secularize the country. But this state violence simply spawned a more extreme form of Islam that called for armed opposition to the regime.

Religious extremism often develops in a symbiotic relationship with a virulently aggressive secularism. One of the Brothers detained in 1954 was Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), the Society's chief propagandist.⁵⁶ As a young man, Qutb had felt no conflict between his faith and secular politics, but he had been alienated by the ruthless policies of the British and shocked by the racial prejudice he experienced during a visit to the United States. Still, his views had remained moderate and tentative; what radicalized him was the violence of Nasser's prison. Qutb was himself tortured and was horrified to see twenty prisoners slaughtered in a single incident. Dozens more were tortured and executed—and not by foreigners but by their own people. Secularism no longer seemed benign but cruel, aggressive, and immoral. In prison, Qutb took Maududi's ideas a step further. When he heard Nasser vowing to privatize Islam on the Western model and observed the unfolding horror of his prison life, Qutb came to believe that even a so-called Muslim ruler could be as violently jahili as any Western power. Like so many others terrorized by violence and injustice, Qutb had developed a dualistic ideology that divided the world starkly into two camps: one accepted God's sovereignty, and the other did not. In the career of Muhammad, God had revealed a practical program for the creation of a properly ordered society. First, acting under God's orders, he had created a jamaat, a "party" committed to justice and equity that held aloof from the pagan establishment. Second, at the hijrah, he had effected a complete severance between the Godly and the Godless. Third, Muhammad had established an Islamic state in Medina; and fourth, he began his jihad against jahili Mecca, which eventually bowed to God's sovereignty.

Qutb formulated these ideas in his book *Milestones*, which was smuggled out of prison and read avidly. He was a learned man, but *Milestones* is not the work of an official Islamic authority; rather, it is the outcry of a man who has been pushed too far. Qutb's program distorted Islamic history, since it made no mention of Muhammad's nonviolent policy at Hudaibiyya, the turning point of the conflict with Mecca. Humiliation, foreign occupation,

and secularizing aggression had created an Islamic history of grievance. Qutb now had a paranoid vision of the past, seeing only a relentless succession of jahili enemies—pagans, Jews, Christians, Crusaders, Mongols, Communists, capitalists, colonialists, and Zionists—intent on the destruction of Islam.⁵⁷ Executed in 1966, he did not live long enough to work out the practical implications of his program. Yet unlike some of his later followers, he seems to have realized that Muslims would have to undergo a long spiritual, social, and political preparation before they were ready for armed struggle. After his death, however, the political situation in the Middle East deteriorated, and the increasing violence and consequent alienation meant that Qutb's work would resonate with the disaffected youth, especially those Brothers who had been likewise hardened in Egyptian jails and felt that there was no time for such a ripening process. When they were released in the early 1970s, they would bring Qutb's ideas into mainstream society and try to implement them practically.

After the Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors in June 1967, the region experienced a religious revival not only in the Muslim countries but also in Israel. Zionism, we have seen, had begun as a defiantly secular movement, and the military campaigns of the Jewish state had had no religious content; their violent suppression of the Palestinian people had been the result of their secular nationalism rather than a religious imperative. Before the war, as they listened to Nasser vowing to throw them all into the sea, many Israelis had been convinced that yet another attempt would be made to exterminate them. They responded with lightning speed, achieving a spectacular victory in which they took the Golan Heights from Syria, the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem from Jordan.

Although religion had not figured in the action, many Israelis would experience this dramatic reversal of fortune as a miracle similar to the crossing of the Red Sea.⁵⁸ Above all, the conquest of the Old City of Jerusalem, closed to Israelis since 1948, was a numinous experience. When in 1898 the Zionist ideologue Theodor Herzl had visited the Western Wall, the last relic of Herod's temple, he had been repelled by the sight of the Jewish worshippers clinging cravenly to its stones.⁵⁹ But in June 1967, though paratroopers with blackened faces and their atheistic officers leaned against the Wall and wept, their secular ethos momentarily transformed by sacred geography. Nationalism, as we have seen, easily segues into a quasi-religious fervor, especially in moments of heightened tension and emotion. Devotion to Jerusalem had been central to Jewish identity for millennia. Long before people began to map their landscape scientifically, they had defined their place in the world emotionally and spiritually, drawn irresistibly to localities that they experienced as radically different from all others. The Israeli experience in 1967 shows that we have still not entirely desacralized the world.⁶⁰ The soldiers' "beliefs" had not changed, but the Wall evoked in them something akin to the way others experienced the sacred—"something big and terrible and from another world," yet also "an old friend, impossible to mistake." Just as they had narrowly escaped destruction, they recognized the Wall as a survivor like themselves. "There will be no more destruction," one soldier said as he kissed the stones, "and the Wall will never again be deserted."⁶¹

"Never again" had been a Jewish watchword since the Holocaust, and now generals and soldiers were using it once more. For the first time too, the term holy city entered Zionist rhetoric. According to the ancient sacred geography of the Middle East, the whole point of a "holy city" was that nobody could own it because it belonged to the god—to Marduk, Baal, or Yahweh. The "City of David" had been ruled by Yahweh from his throne in the temple, the king merely acting as his anointed representative. Instead of becoming the personal property of the ruler, Jerusalem was "holy" (qaddosh) precisely because it was

“set apart” for Yahweh. But once the emotions of sacred geography were fused with the Israelis’ secular nationalism, in which territorial integrity was all important, politicians had no doubt that Jerusalem belonged absolutely to the Israeli state. “We have returned to our most holy places,” said the avowed secularist commander Moshe Dayan; “we have returned and we shall never leave them.”⁶² Jerusalem had become a nonnegotiable absolute that transcended all other claims. Even though international law forbade the permanent occupation of territory conquered during a conflict, Abba Eban, Israel’s delegate to the United Nations, argued that Jerusalem “lies beyond and above, before and after, all political and secular considerations.”⁶³

The sacred geography of Israel also had a strong moral and political dimension. While Israelis lauded Jerusalem as the city of shalom (“peace,” “wholeness”), the Psalms had insisted that there would be no shalom in Jerusalem without justice (tzeddek). The king was charged by Yahweh to “defend the poorest, save the children of those in need and crush their oppressors.”⁶⁴ In Yahweh’s Zion there could be no oppression and violence; rather, it must be a haven for the poor (evionim). But once the “holiness” of Jerusalem had been fused with the secular nation-state, its Palestinian inhabitants became a vulnerable minority and their presence a contamination. On the night of June 10, 1967, after the signing of the armistice, the 619 Palestinian inhabitants of the Maghribi Quarter beside the Wall were given three hours to evacuate their homes. Then, in contravention of international law, the bulldozers came in and reduced this historic district—one of the earliest Jerusalem awqaf—to rubble. On June 28 the Israeli Knesset formally annexed the Old City and East Jerusalem, declaring them part of the State of Israel.

Secular nationalism had exploited and distorted a religious ideal; but a religious embrace of the modern nation-state could be equally dangerous. Well before 1967, Orthodox Jews had sacralized the secular state of Israel and made it a supreme value. A somewhat despised religious version of Zionism had always existed alongside the secular nationalism of most Israelis.⁶⁵ It became slightly more prominent during the 1950s, when a group of young Orthodox, including Moshe Levinger, Shlomo Aviner, Yaakov Ariel, and Eliezer Waldman, had fallen under the spell of the aging Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, who regarded the secular State of Israel as a “divine entity” and the Kingdom of God on earth. In exile it had been impossible to observe the commandments tied to the Land; now there was a yearning for wholeness. Instead of excluding the sacred from political life, Kookists, as the rabbi’s followers became known, intended it to pervade the whole of existence once again—“all the time and in every area.” Political engagement, therefore, had become an “ascent to the pinnacles of holiness.” The Kookists transformed the Land into an idol, an earthly object that had absolute status and required the unquestioning veneration and commitment that traditionally applied only to the transcendence we call God. “Zionism is a heavenly matter,” Kook insisted. “The State of Israel is a divine entity, our holy and exalted state.”⁶⁶ For Kook, every clod of Israel’s soil was holy; its institutions were divine; and the weapons of Israeli soldiers were as sacred as prayer shawls. But Israel, like any state, was far from ideal and guilty of both structural and martial violence. In the past, prophets had challenged the systemic injustice of the state, and priests had been critical even of its holy wars. For the Kookists, however, secular Israel was beyond criticism and essential to the world’s salvation. With the establishment of Israel, Messianic redemption had already begun: “Every Jew who comes to Eretz Yisrael, every tree that is planted in the soil of Israel, every soldier added to the army of Israel constitutes another spiritual stage; literally, another stage in the process of redemption.”⁶⁷

As we have seen, ancient Israel from the very first had looked askance at state violence; now the Kookists gave it supreme sanction. Once the nation-state becomes the highest

value, however, as Lord Acton had predicted, there is no limit to what it can do—literally, anything goes. By elevating the state to the divine level, Kookists had also given sacred endorsement to nationalism's shadow side: its intolerance of minorities. Unless Jews occupied the entire Land, Israel would remain tragically incomplete, so annexing Arab territory was a supreme religious duty.⁶⁸ A few days after the Six-Day War, the Labor government proposed to return some of the occupied territories—including some of the most important biblical sites on the West Bank—to the Arabs in exchange for peace and recognition. The Kookists vehemently opposed the plan and, to their surprise, found that for the first time they had secular allies. A group of Israeli poets, philosophers, and army officers, fired by the victory, had come together to prevent any such handover and offered the Kookists moral and financial support. Secular nationalists made common cause with the hitherto despised religious Zionists, realizing that they had exactly the same objectives.

Enthused by this backing, in April 1968, Moshe Levinger led a small group of families to celebrate Passover in Hebron on the West Bank. They checked into the Park Hotel and, to the embarrassment of the Labor government, refused to leave. But their chutzpah tugged at Laborite heartstrings because it recalled the audacity of the chalutzim, who in the days before the state had defied the British by squatting aggressively in Arab land.⁶⁹ Yet again, secular and religious enthusiasms merged dangerously. For the Kookists, Hebron—the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—was contaminated by the presence of the Palestinians, who also revered these prophets. They now refused to leave the Cave of the Patriarchs in time for Muslim communal prayer, noisily blocking the entrances and flying the Israeli flag at the shrine on Independence Day.⁷⁰ When a Palestinian finally threw a hand grenade, the Israeli government reluctantly established an enclave guarded by the IDF for the settlers outside Hebron; by 1972 Kiryat Arba had five thousand inhabitants. For Kookists it was an outpost pushing against the frontiers of the demonic world of the “Other Side.”

Yet still Labor refused to annex the territories. After the October War of 1973, when Egypt and Syria invaded Sinai and the Golan Heights and were repelled only with great difficulty, a group of Kookists, rabbis, and hawkish secularists formed Gush Emunim, the “Bloc of the Faithful.” A pressure group rather than a political party, its objective was nothing less than “the full redemption of Israel and the entire world.”⁷¹ As a “holy people,” Israel was not bound by UN resolutions or international law. Gush's ultimate plan was to colonize the entire West Bank and transplant hundreds of thousands of Jews into the occupied territories. To make their point, they organized hikes and rallies in the West Bank, and on Independence Day 1975 nearly twenty thousand armed Jews attended a West Bank “picnic,” marching militantly from one location to another.⁷²

The Gush experienced their marches, battles with the army, and illegal squats as rituals that brought them a sense of ecstasy and release.⁷³ The fact that they attracted so much secularist support showed that they were tapping into nationalistic passions that were felt just as strongly by Israelis who had no time at all for religion. They could also draw on the Western tradition of natural human rights that had long declared that an endangered people—and after the October War, who, they asked, could deny that Israelis were endangered?—were entitled to settle in “vacant” land. Their sacred task was to ensure that it was truly “empty.” When the Likud party led by Menachem Begin defeated Labor in the 1977 elections and declared its commitment to Israeli settlement on both sides of the Jordan, Kookists believed that God was at work. But the honeymoon was short-lived. On November 20, 1977, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt made his historic journey to Jerusalem to initiate a peace process, and the following year Begin and Sadat, two former terrorists, signed the Camp David Accords: Israel would return the Sinai Peninsula to

Egypt in exchange for Egypt's formal recognition of the State of Israel. Observing this unexpected development, many Western people concluded that secular pragmatism would prevail after all.

The Iranian Revolution shattered that hope. Western politicians had regarded Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi as a progressive leader and had put their muscle behind his regime, regardless of the fact that he had no legitimacy among his own people. Iranians were in fact experiencing the structural violence of "the West and the Rest" in an acute form. Independence, democracy, human rights, and national self-determination were for "the West"; but for Iranians, violence, domination, exploitation, and tyranny were to be the order of the day. In 1953 a coup organized by the CIA and British Intelligence had unseated the secular nationalist premier Muhammad Musaddiq (who had tried to nationalize the Iranian oil industry) and reinstated the shah. This event showed Iranians how little they could command their own destiny. After 1953, like the British before them, the United States controlled the monarch and Iran's oil reserves, demanding diplomatic privileges and trade concessions. American businessmen and consultants poured into the country, and though a few Iranians benefited from the boom, most did not. In 1962 the shah began his White Revolution by closing the Majlis legislature and pushed his unpopular reforms through with the support of SAVAK, the dreaded secret police trained by the CIA and Israeli Mossad. These reforms were applauded in the West, since they established capitalism, undermined feudal landownership, and promoted literacy and women's rights, but in fact they favored the rich, concentrated on city dwellers, and ignored the peasantry.⁷⁴ There were the usual symptoms of an economy modernizing too rapidly: agriculture declined, and rural migrants poured into the cities, living in desolate shantytowns and eking out a precarious existence as porters and street vendors.⁷⁵ SAVAK made Iranians feel like prisoners in their own country, and clandestine Marxist and Islamist guerrilla groups formed in opposition to a secular government that violently suppressed all opposition.

One little-known cleric had the courage to speak out publicly against this oppressive regime. In 1963 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89), professor of ethics at the Fayziyah Madrassa in Qum, began a sustained attack on the shah, condemning his use of torture, his closing the Majlis, his spineless subservience to the United States, and his support for Israel, which denied Palestinians fundamental human rights. On one occasion he stood with the Quran in one hand and the 1906 constitution in the other, and accused the shah of betraying both.⁷⁶ On March 22, 1963, the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Sixth Imam, SAVAK attacked the madrassa, arrested Khomeini, and killed some of the students. After his release, Khomeini resumed the offensive. During the Ashura rituals, in his eulogy for Husain, he compared the shah to Caliph Yazid, the villain of the Karbala tragedy.⁷⁷ When Khomeini was arrested for a second time, thousands of Iranians poured onto the streets, laymen and mullahs protesting side by side. SAVAK was given shoot-to-kill orders, and clerics braved the guns wearing the white shroud of the martyr, demonstrating their willingness to die like Husain in the struggle against tyranny. By the time peace was finally restored, hundreds of civilians had been killed.⁷⁸

The regime, Khomeini protested, was assaulting its own people. Always he championed the poor, the chief victims of its systemic injustice, ordering the shah to leave his palace and look at the deplorable conditions in the shantytowns. Iran, he claimed on October 27, 1964, was virtually an American colony. It was a rich country, and it was a disgrace that people were sleeping in the streets. For decades foreigners had been plundering their oil, so that it was of no benefit to the Iranian people. "I am deeply concerned about the conditions of the poor next winter, as I expect many to die, God forbid, from cold and

starvation,” he concluded. “The ulema should think of the poor and take action now to prevent the atrocities of last winter.”⁷⁹ After this speech Khomeini was deported and went into exile in Iraq. Overnight, he had become a hero in Iran, a symbol of resolute Shii opposition to oppression. Marxist or liberal ideology could have appealed to only a few Iranians, but everybody, especially the urban poor, understood the imagery of Karbala. In the West we are accustomed to extrovert and crowd-pleasing politicians, so it was hard for us to understand Khomeini’s appeal, but Iranians recognized his withdrawn demeanor, inward-seeming gaze, and monotonous delivery as the sign of a “sober” mystic who had achieved full control of the senses.⁸⁰ In exile in Najaf too, near the tomb of Imam Ali, Khomeini became closely associated with the Twelve Imams in the minds of the people, and thanks to modern communications, he would continue to direct events from afar—not unlike the Hidden Imam.

In the West, Khomeini would be widely regarded as a fanatic and his success seen as a triumph of superstition over rationality. Yet his principled opposition to systemic violence and demand for global justice was deeply in tune with contemporaneous religious developments in the West. His message was not dissimilar to that of Pope John XXIII (r. 1958–63), whose encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* (1961) insisted that unfettered capitalism was immoral and unsustainable; instead, “all forms of economic enterprise must be governed by the principles of social justice and charity.” The pope also called for global equity. National prosperity was not enough: “Man’s aim must be to achieve in social justice a national and international juridical order ... in which all economic activity can be conducted not merely for private gain but also in the interests of the common good.”⁸¹ In *Pacem in Terris* (1963), the pope insisted that human rights rather than economic profit must be the basis of international relations—a plea clearly critical of the exploitative Western policies in undeveloped countries.

At about the same time as Khomeini was inveighing against the injustice of the shah, the Catholic Church in Latin America was evolving its Liberation Theology. Priests and nuns encouraged small communities of the poor to study the Bible in order to redress the systemic violence of Brazilian society. In 1968 Latin American bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, to support the emerging themes of this new movement, which argued that Jesus was on the side of the poor and oppressed and that Christians must struggle for justice and equality. In Latin America, as in Iran, this kind of theology was deeply threatening to the political and economic elites. Liberation priests were dubbed “communists” and, like Iranian clerics, were imprisoned, tortured, and executed because they made it clear that the economic order imposed on the “Third World” by the colonial West was inherently violent:

For centuries, Latin America has been a region of violence. We are talking of the violence that a privileged minority has been using, since the colonial period, to exploit the vast majority of the people. We are talking of the violence of hunger, of helplessness, of underdevelopment ... of illegal but existing slavery, of social, intellectual, and economic discrimination.⁸²

They insisted that because the world was now so economically interdependent, a North American individual was able to live a comfortable life only because other people, living perhaps in a Brazilian slum, were impoverished; they could purchase goods cheaply because others had been exploited in their production.⁸³

In the United States too, religion acquired a revolutionary edge and for the first time in the twentieth century opposed the policies of the American government. While presidents John

F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were careful to keep religion out of politics, liberal Catholics, Protestants, and Jews campaigned in the name of their faith against the structural and military violence of the United States. Like Iranian Shii Muslims, they took to the streets to protest the Vietnam War and joined Martin Luther King's civil rights movement against racial discrimination at home. In 1962 the National Council of Churches asked Kennedy to commit the nation to "an all-out effort to abolish [poverty], both at home and abroad."⁸⁴

Khomeini, often thought in the West to be a rabble-rouser, was not advocating violence. The crowds who protested on the streets were unarmed, and their deaths laid bare the ruthless ferocity of the shah's secular regime. The assassination of Martin Luther King, who had insisted that a nonviolent response to injury was "an absolute necessity for our survival ... the key to the solution of the problems of our world,"⁸⁵ also revealed the latent violence of American society. King would have agreed with Khomeini's demand for global justice. He had lamented Kennedy's disastrous colonial misadventure in the Bay of Pigs (1961), and even though Johnson had given African Americans more than any previous president, he refused to support his war in Vietnam. But in the late 1970s, when the Iranian revolution broke out, the mood in the West had changed. In 1978 the conservative bishop of Cracow Karol Wojtyla, a fierce opponent of Liberation Theology, was elected to the papacy, taking the name of John Paul II. The fundamentalist Moral Majority had surged to the forefront of American religious life, and the Democratic president Jimmy Carter, a "born-again" Christian who campaigned vigorously for human rights, was a loyal supporter of the shah's dictatorship.

Viewed from the West, Iran seemed to be booming during the 1970s, but the state had become rich at the expense of the nation; a million people were unemployed, local merchants had been ruined by the influx of foreign goods, and there was widespread resentment of the flourishing American expatriates.⁸⁶ After Khomeini's departure, the shah had become even more autocratic and started to secularize more aggressively, confiscating the awqaf and bringing the madrassas under strict bureaucratic control.⁸⁷ When Ayatollah Riza Saidi denounced the regime, he was tortured to death, and thousands of demonstrators poured onto the streets of Qum.⁸⁸ The charismatic lay philosopher Ali Shariati (1933–77), who had studied at the Sorbonne, kept the revolutionary flame alive among the young Westernized Iranians.⁸⁹ He told them that if they tried to conform too closely to the Western ideal and abandoned the Shiah, they would lose themselves; the example of Ali and Husain compelled Muslims to stand up and say no to injustice, coercion, and tyranny. Shariati too was tortured, imprisoned, and died in exile, almost certainly the victim of SAVAK agents. In Najaf in 1971, Khomeini published *Islamic Government*, arguing that the ulema should rule the state. His doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* ("the government of a [Muslim] jurist") seemed to fly in the face of Western modernity and was shocking to most Shiis, since for centuries the clergy had refused official posts—in the absence of the Hidden Imam, they regarded any government as corrupt. But Khomeini's thought was clearly in line with those Third World intellectuals who defied global structural violence. Islam, he would always claim, was "the religion of militant individuals who are committed to faith and justice. It is the religion of those who desire freedom and independence. It is the school of those who struggle against imperialism."⁹⁰

Even though nobody at this date, Khomeini included, believed that it was possible to topple the shah, events were moving faster than he had anticipated. In November 1977, his son Mustafa was assassinated in Iraq, again almost certainly by SAVAK agents,⁹¹ and the shah forbade mourning ceremonies to be held. This only identified Khomeini even more closely with the Shii Imams, since like Husain, his son had been murdered by an

unjust ruler, casting the shah yet again as Yazid. And at this critical juncture, U.S. president Jimmy Carter cast himself as the “Great Satan.” In November 1977, while Iran was mourning Mustafa Khomeini, the shah visited Washington, and Carter spoke with great emotion of the United States’ “special relationship” with Iran, “an island of stability in a turbulent corner of the world.”⁹² He thus entered the unfolding Karbala drama as the shaytan, the “tempter,” who lured the shah to follow the United States to the detriment of his own people.

The revolution began on January 8, 1978, when the semiofficial newspaper Ettelaat published a preposterous attack on Khomeini.⁹³ The next day four thousand unarmed students in Qum demanded a revival of the 1906 constitution, freedom of speech, the release of political prisoners, and the return of Khomeini. Throughout, Iranians showed that they had fully absorbed the modern ethos, demanding the independence, liberty, and constitutional rule that they had been consistently denied by the shah’s secular government and the international community. Seventy of these students were killed. With this massacre, the regime crossed a line. A pattern now emerged. Forty days after the Qum massacre, crowds gathered for the traditional mourning ceremonies for the dead, and more people were shot down. Forty days later there were more ritualized rallies in honor of the new martyrs. Marxists, secularists, and liberals who opposed the shah but knew that they had no grassroots appeal joined forces with the religiously minded revolutionaries. This was not a violent uprising, however. Cinemas, banks, and liquor stores—symbols of the “great shaytan”—were attacked, but not people.⁹⁴ By now the jails were full of political prisoners, and the mounting death toll showed the world that the shah’s secular regime, lauded in the West as progressive and peaceful, was slaughtering its own people.

The revolution was experienced as a religious as well as a political event. Demonstrators carried placards reading “Everywhere is Karbala, and every day is Ashura,” convinced that they were following Husain in their struggle against oppression.⁹⁵ They spoke of the revolution as a transforming and purifying experience, as if they were purging themselves of a debilitating poison and regaining authenticity.⁹⁶ Many felt as though Husain himself were leading them and that Khomeini, like the Hidden Imam, was directing them from afar.⁹⁷ On the last night of Ramadan, September 4, vast crowds prostrated themselves in prayer in the streets, but—an important turning point—this time the army did not open fire. Even more significant, the middle classes began to join in the protests, marching with placards reading: “Independence, Freedom and Islamic Government!”⁹⁸ At six a.m. on September 8, martial law was declared, but the twenty thousand demonstrators who were already gathering in Jaleh Square did not know it; when they refused to disperse, the soldiers opened fire. As many as nine hundred people may have died that day.⁹⁹

That evening Carter called the shah from Camp David to assure him of his support, and the White House, while regretting the loss of life, reaffirmed its special relationship with Iran. The liberty and independence for which the American revolutionaries had fought were clearly not for everybody. On the first three nights of Muharram, men donned the white shroud of the martyr and ran through the streets defying the curfew, while others shouted anti-shah slogans from the rooftops. The BBC estimated that seven hundred people had been killed by the Iranian army and police in these few days alone.¹⁰⁰ Yet still there was no mob violence. On December 9, for six hours a vast procession—at different times numbering between 300,000 and 1.5 million people—wound through the streets of Tehran, walking quietly four abreast. Two million more marched on the day of Ashura itself, carrying green, red, and black flags, representing Islam, martyrdom, and the Shiah.¹⁰¹

A month later it was all over. The shah and the royal family flew to Egypt, and on February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned to Tehran. His arrival was one of those events, like the storming of the Bastille, that seemed to change the world forever. For committed liberal secularists, it was a dark moment, the triumph of the forces of unreason over rationality. But for many Muslims, Sunni as well as Shii, it seemed a luminous reversal. As he drove through the streets of Tehran, the crowds greeted him as if he were the returned Hidden Imam, confident that a new age had dawned. Taha Hejazi published a poem of celebration, a tremulous hope for the justice that the shah and the international community had denied them:

When the Imam returns,
Iran—this broken, wounded mother—
Will be forever liberated
From the shackles of tyranny and ignorance
And the chains of plunder, torture and prison.¹⁰²

Khomeini liked to quote the hadith in which the Prophet announced after a battle that he was returning from the lesser to the “greater jihad,” the implementation of truly Islamic values in society, a struggle far more exacting than the “lesser” military one. As he looked at the ecstatic crowds that day, he must surely have felt apprehension at the more onerous jihad about to begin.

It was indeed a struggle: almost at once, perhaps predictably, the fragile coalition of Marxists, liberals, and the devout seemed to unravel. There was opposition to the new constitution, in 1980 four separate plots against the regime were uncovered, and there were constant street battles between secularist guerrillas and Khomeini’s Revolutionary Guards. A reign of terror ensued, not unlike those that followed the French and Russian Revolutions, when so-called revolutionary councils, which the government could not control, executed hundreds of people for “un-Islamic behavior.” As a crowning blow, on September 20, 1980, the southwest of the country was invaded by Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi forces. During this turbulent period, the American hostage crisis proved a godsend to Khomeini. On November 4, 1979, three thousand Iranian students had stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and taken ninety prisoners. It is not clear whether Khomeini knew of their plan beforehand, and everyone expected him to release the hostages immediately. But although the women hostages and the embassy’s Marine guards were allowed to return to America, the remaining fifty-two diplomats were held for 444 days. In the West, this disreputable affair seemed to epitomize Islamic radicalism.

Yet Khomeini’s decision to retain the hostages was inspired not by an Islamic imperative but simply by politics. He could see that this focus on the Great Satan would unite Iranians behind him at his difficult juncture. As he explained to his prime minister Bani Sadr:

This action has many benefits. The Americans do not want to see the Islamic Republic taking root. We keep the hostages, finish our internal work, and then release them. This has united our people. Our opponents do not dare act against us. We can put the constitution to the people’s vote without difficulty, and carry out presidential and parliamentary elections. When we have finished all these jobs, we can let the hostages go.¹⁰³

As soon as they were no longer useful, the hostages were released on January 20, 1981, the inauguration day of the new U.S. president Ronald Reagan and the departure of his “satanic” predecessor Jimmy Carter. Inevitably the hostage crisis tainted the image and

idealism of the Islamic Revolution. Many Iranians were unhappy about it, even while appreciating its symbolism. A nation's embassy is regarded as its sovereign territory on foreign soil, and some thought it apt that American citizens should be held there, just as for decades Iranians had felt imprisoned in their own country with the connivance of the United States. But this was simply revenge politics, and the cruel treatment meted out to the hostages violated cardinal principles of all faith traditions, not least those of Islam. Whatever the regime gained by stopping the clock while it achieved a degree of stability, it would pay for over many years in the ledger of the privileged free world.

The great genius of the Shiah was its tragic perception that it is impossible fully to implement the ideals of religion in the inescapably violent realm of politics. Ashoka had discovered this even earlier than the Shii Imams when he promoted his compassionate dharma but could not disband his army. At best, people of faith can either bear witness to these values, as Khomeini did when he castigated the injustice of the Pahlavi regime in the 1960s, or provide an alternative that either challenges or seeks to mitigate state violence. But as we have seen throughout this story, even the most humanitarian traditions are unable to implement their ideals if they identify with a state ideology that inevitably depends upon force. Khomeini believed that the revolution had been a rebellion against the rational pragmatism of the modern world. The goal of his theory of *velayat-e faqih* was to institutionalize Shii values: the supreme jurist (*faqih*) and the ulema on the Council of Guardians would have the power to veto any legislation that violated the principles of Islamic justice.¹⁰⁴ But in practice, Khomeini would often have to reprove the guardians for playing selfish power games, just as he himself had felt compelled to pursue a cynical *realpolitik* during the hostage crisis.

We have seen that revolutions can take a long time, and like the French Revolution, the Iranian Revolution has passed through many stages and is still in progress. As in France, Iranians feared that powerful external enemies would destroy the Islamic regime. In the summer of 1983 the Iraqis attacked Iranian troops with mustard gas and then with nerve gas the following year.¹⁰⁵ Khomeini was convinced that America would organize a coup similar to the one that had deposed Musaddiq in 1953. Because Iran had antagonized the West, she had forfeited essential equipment, spare parts, and technical advice; inflation was high, and by 1982 unemployment had risen to 30 percent of the general population and 50 percent in the cities.¹⁰⁶ The poor, whose plight Khomeini had championed, were not doing much better under the revolution. Yet Western observers had to acknowledge that, despite the growing opposition of Westernized Iranians, Khomeini never lost the love of the masses, especially the bazaaris, the madrasa students, the less-eminent ulema, and the poor.¹⁰⁷ These people, whom the shah's modernization program had overlooked, still thought and spoke in a traditionally religious, premodern way that many Westerners could not even comprehend.

After the Iranian Revolution, one exasperated U.S. official was heard to exclaim: "Whoever took religion seriously?"¹⁰⁸ Since the Enlightenment, revolutions were understood to occur at a time when the *saeculum* had reached maturity and was strong enough to declare its independence of faith.¹⁰⁹ The idea of a popular uprising ushering in a religiously oriented state was almost embarrassing in its upending of accepted wisdom; many Westerners deplored it as atavistic and perverse. But they seemed unable to see that by pursuing their own political and economic agendas that did violence to the Iranian people, Western governments had bred a new species of religion. They had been blind to the particular problems of the postcolonial state and the pitfalls of a modernization imposed from without rather than effected organically from within.¹¹⁰ And in deploring the new theocracy, they failed to appreciate a central irony. The Western ideals of liberty had

fired the Iranian imagination and inspired Iranians to demand basic freedoms, but the Western secular ideal had been irredeemably tainted for Iranians by the self-interest and cruelty with which it had been pursued. The United States declared that it had a God-given mission to spread liberty throughout the world, but this had evidently not included the people of Iran. “We did not expect Carter to defend the shah, for he is a religious man who has raised the slogan of defending human rights,” an ayatollah explained to an interviewer after the revolution. “How can Carter, the devout Christian, defend the shah?”¹¹¹ Such perplexity reveals how strange a premodern sensibility must find the idea of religion as a private matter.

The Iranian Revolution had dramatically changed the status quo in the Persian Gulf. The shah had been one of the key pillars of U.S. policy in the region, permitting the West to access its vast oil reserves at a viable price. In December 1979, the Soviet Union sought to capitalize on America’s loss of influence in the region by invading Iran’s neighbor Afghanistan. This Cold War struggle between the superpowers helped to inspire a global jihad that would eventually target the United States and its allies. But it would be some time before the West recognized this danger, because during the 1980s and 1990s, it was more concerned with terrorist atrocities and violence in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent that seemed wholly inspired by “religion.”

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